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Lamb Bright Saviors [Excerpt: Noon Song & Mady]

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FLYOVER FICTION

Series editor:

Ron Hansen

Lamb Bright Saviors

ROBERT VIVIAN

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Set in Minion and VAG Rounded

by Bob Reitz.

This book is for beloved T,
the girl from Big Rapids —
And for William Palmer and Carol Bender,
who have taught me more than they will ever know.

When the hearer
has become thirsty and craving,
the preacher,
even if he be as good as dead,
becomes eloquent.

RUMI

As long as we remain sheep,
we overcome.

JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

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Lamb Bright Saviors

Noon Song

The preacher came up the dusty road followed by the girl pulling the wagon stacked with bibles. The preacher walked ahead of her, working it from side to side like he was addressing the last assembly on earth, staying ahead of the girl, who struggled to keep up. From far away the heat made their footsteps tremble on the dusty road like candle flames, caesura and counter-caesura in the moth-betoken fluttering of the wayfarer world. The girl stopped once or twice to catch her breath but the preacher kept striding ahead on long scissor legs toward the kingdom of God. He was shouting about salvation into the clear bright air above his head, but the words got lost in the ransack cadence of his apocalyptic cries. The bibles looked like a pyramid of gold-green bars stacked by an Egyptian slave. They were stacked neatly and covered with taut mosquito netting in the beat-up wagon, like newly minted gold.

The girl leaned into her load with the leather headband

strapped across her forehead, her arms free and swinging in the determined tug of perpetual incline all the way to the horizon. The wheels creaked and groaned when the girl made the extra push to make up lost ground, but she was still a good twenty feet behind and fading. In a few miles he'd be in another county and she'd be left behind. Then the race to nowhere would be over, and he'd be victorious over the drop-dead miles. The girl had black renegade hair all the way down her back and was around thirteen years old, though she didn't know her date of birth or town of origin. Her white summer dress was torn at the hem and she wore pink flip-flops that made the sound of cards in the spokes of a bicycle tire dealing out one bad card after another.

The preacher wore an old-time getup straight out of a traveling circus, replete with frilly mustard-colored vest, silver watch chain, and cream-colored tie, his straw hat slightly askew on his head, with dark moons of sweat under his arms. Flies gathered there to wash the TV screens of their eyes. The preacher was six-foot-seven with a wreath of white hair around his bald pate to match his albino face as the searing Nebraska heat flame-broiled Jesus inside his mouth. His coat and pants were yellow all the way down to his lemon wingtip shoes as he went banana sailing into the sun. He was preaching it up for the record books, his arms a flurry of restless birds for the sake of invisible deaf folks, like he was talking to a congregation in the dream church of his mind. His teeth flashed and snapped before the girl like a thousand shiny doors. Somehow four or five crisp bills of each denomination got loose from his waving arms and sputtered, fan-like, in the air, drifting all the way back to the girl, who did nothing to retrieve them.

No way to tell where they were going or where they had been, but it must have encompassed the world: the preacher and the girl were far out on the sea of a lonely country road where hardly a soul deigned to pass. Ditch weed and corn rows watched them go by in a gauntlet of vegetable eyes. He didn't look back at the girl to see how she was doing. His neglect was monstrous and profound, like ignoring her was central to his call.

Before long the preacher pulled up in the middle of the road, whipped out his johnson, and started pissing on the ground without ceremony while keeping up his rhapsody about all of creation. What you could hear of it was ecstatic and full of oaths, as close to babble as praise will ever get. He could have been leaning over a pulpit with crazed yellow fingernails. Turning his head from side to side he ordained both east and west to get the message out, though what the message was had never been established. Meanwhile his member dangled in front of him like scandalous bruised tackle in the plumb harvest kingdom of the uncircumcised. The girl almost caught up with him to see this baleful sight for herself before he shook off a jibber or two and put his joint back in, ready to step it up again with renewed vigor.

But he didn't get very far.

Ten feet into it he started to stagger back and forth like a drunk man and ended up doing a fey pirouette before falling face-down in the road, his hat tumbling off his head. The girl took off her headband and raced over to him, leaning down over him as her dress ballooned up with air. She put her head against his chest to listen to his heartbeat, rose up again, flipped her hair back, and settled in to listen again to his quiet rib cage of dread.

They stayed like that for a long time, a tableau of fallen travelers locked together. When she looked up her face was full of anguish, grieving for the one who had so recently been in high fever mode for the Lord. She lay back across him and covered him with her sobs, quaking with grief. Some rough-looking men fishing down by the reservoir saw what had happened and came to investigate, eventually carrying the preacher to a blind lady's house who lived about a mile away before some thunderheads rolled in and it started to pour. Though what happened after that would shake them all up forever.

Mady

When you come to a small town for the first time, far away from any other place, you have to be careful to keep the joy in till you find somewhere safe where you can let it out in secret, like maybe in a diner with an old man sitting alone and staring out the window. Every diner has one old man sitting at a booth next to the window, with what happened to him long ago buried so deep inside him it ends up in the lines of his wrinkled face.

In the old man's eyes you can see the window curving back, piling up the distance where a pretty girl sits in a room somewhere, her laughter ringing up near the ceiling then fading away in the wind outside. That's how it happens. The room is locked up or gone but he keeps trying the door because the pretty girl's in there talking to him in her pure canary-bird voice, which he loves and hates at the same time, like the voice of every pretty girl. That's what he keeps thinking about after everyone has died or left him.

The first hour after you come into town is usually the best because you don't know what will happen, though you've been in lots of towns before. Don't take the joy out and spill it over the table because you're liable to knock people down with sudden bolts of gladness. Unless you know CPR or can give mouth-to-mouth, I wouldn't risk it. Get a lay of the land and have a Coke first, or, if they have it under glass, a piece of key lime pie. Then take a careful gander around the room and size up the situation while the joy shoots off sparklers inside you.

Who's in the diner and what else do you see?

The waitress's hands look like tired ropes, along with the back of her elbows, which remind you of this chimp you once saw at a circus. She's moving between the tables with a pot of coffee in her hand. Chances are she'd give you a smoke in a pinch. She has two teenage girls at home, but one of them is about to get pregnant and she sees the baby screaming bloody murder out of his teething mouth a few weeks after he's born. Then there's this construction worker covered in dry wall wearing a baseball hat that says St. Louis Cardinals on it, who dreams about bikini girls and foreign sports cars. In fifty years he'll swap places with the old man sitting by himself and the diner will officially become immortal. The other waitress is only five or six years older than you and pretty in a cover girl kind of way: her hair's the color of tasseled corn and tied up in a ponytail. The dust-covered worker watches her behind as it tick tocks back and forth in her jeans and takes another greasy bite of his hamburger.

She's racing around the diner, refilling cups though there's

only four other people in the whole place, so where's the fire? Last night she was at a party where a guy punched a hole in the wall to impress her. Someday that hole will come back to her again, growing into something else until it opens a place in her heart.

The businessman in the corner is on a different vibe altogether, more like a barren landscape where he walks alone all day with puffs of moon dust trailing behind his dress shoes. A phone rings in his ear for eight hours straight with calls from customers as office reports fall around him like leaves. He can't smell anything but paperclips and plastic, like he's breathing teargas all day. He wants to rip off all his clothes and sit naked in the diner, but that's not likely to happen. The only other people in the diner are a big woman who is alone in another booth on the other side of the room and a skinny black man at the counter. The woman has jangling bracelets on her arms that sound like hubcaps falling down a stairwell. She's had two pieces of pie and is eyeing a third. Every time she takes a bite a part of her starts crying and if you're super quiet and still you can hear the wail from where you sit. Before the pie she had the Chicken Salad Special along with a couple of Diet Cokes and some crackers. She's eating herself to death even as it's opening up craters inside her.

The skinny black man sitting at the counter has a bunch of bright-colored brooms standing up next to him. They look like another person or maybe a scarecrow except they're missing heads and arms. You can tell he tries selling them door to door, but the brooms are nothing fancy, just some

strands tied together with multicolored string. He's dressed real nice, but his shoes look like he's traveled a long way, maybe as much as you have. You can't tell how old he is, somewhere between fifty or a hundred, with kinky white hair coming out from under an umpire's baseball hat. He's so thin you could shave a piece of ham with his arms. You have the feeling you could share the joy with the broom man because he looks like he might understand it, but that would still be taking a big chance and you've only been in town for twenty minutes.

Meanwhile a few flies buzz around the windows trying to get out and the ceiling fan whirs so fast it looks like it's about to take off. You can hear dishes in the kitchen and something frying on the stove, but beneath it all is this deep-down quiet that feels kinda holy and kinda sad, too. It's a nice small town as far as towns go, a good place to kick up your heels awhile and maybe live out the rest of your natural born days. The last thing you wanna do right then is get up and walk away. Mr. Gene is flexing his jaw muscles again, like he's chomping at the bit to try out his speeches. He's thinking of a new way to say Amen or Jesus, but it's not coming easily.

He doesn't pay much attention to you in the diner, but that's okay. You're just a kid hauling a bunch of bibles in a wagon you call Junior Wobbly. You have enough work to do just to keep the joy from busting out and spilling all over. There's a song you can sing to help keep the joy preoccupied, though it's better to hum it because the words could give you away—

I'm just a girl in a new small town
With the joy of heaven inside me
I won't let it out till the time is right
in a place like Katmandu or Miami.

Choirs of angels have gathered round the streets outside, but no one else can see them. They don't have fancy harps or nothin' like that, they just tend to glow in halos shaking under the eaves. Tell yourself in no-nonsense words about who you are and what's going on: *I'm Mady Kim Seymour and I carry the secret joy no one can touch swimming inside me.* The joy will take care of the rest on sawhorses in your brain. Somewhere along the way you learned good manners, but it wasn't from your mama, because Mr. Gene kidnapped you away for the Lord when you were just a snot-nosed toddler. You can still see him coming into the burning room and sweeping you up in his arms while the walls turn to forest fires in the house he had burned down just for you.

The menu is stained with ketchup at the bottom of the page over the egg breakfast that goes for \$2.99. Throw in some hash browns for an extra buck and a quarter and you're in heaven. The ketchup stain has turned into glowing red on your fingertips, but it's a red you can live with.

Where does the joy come from anyway?

Nobody can say, but walking from town to town tends to shine its spinning propellers some. Who could be hungrier or more alive than you after walking eight miles in the open air while Mr. Gene tries out his speeches on the birds flying overhead? That's when you have to practice slow, careful

breathing and pretend you're sitting Indian-style on the floor. Sunlight pours into the diner in coffin lids of brightness so big they chop the older waitress in half. It's a good idea to be expert at making hangdog faces so nobody will think you're having too much fun for no good reason. Think of cold rain trickling down the back of your neck with miles ahead of you then add a dead grandmother or two and you should be good to go.

The time of day you come into the town is important because you don't want to come in either too early or too late. I almost forgot to mention that. Around two is best, or maybe a little after, when people are sleepy after lunch. Park Junior Wobbly out back and strap it down with the seat belt you found outside a Memphis scrap yard. Mr. Gene said it's tailor-made for bibles and it's hard to disagree.

Cherry pie crumbs dot the sides of his mouth like a couple of nicks from shaving. Somewhere along the way he forgot how to shave his whole face so there are patches of fuzz on his cheek above his polka-dotted bow tie. It's like Mr. Gene got kicked in the head by a horse when he was young, or maybe struck by lightning: what he says and tries to say don't usually make sense unless you can understand the language of cicadas and croaking frogs and screams rolling down a mountainside.

In the meantime the joy is simmering below your sundress inside your skin and even deeper than that: it goes so far inside it's like when you peel back the layers of an onion and it makes you wanna cry. People are happy and sad around you, but that's not the same as joy: it's more like this little

dog that keeps chasing its tail in circles no matter what else is going on around it. Late at night Mr. Gene'll call the new town Jerusalem in his sleep and wake up moaning. Pretend you didn't hear him. You don't want to embarrass the one you love so much.

Mr. Gene thinks he can preach in every town we go to, but the truth is most towns don't understand a word he says. Most of the time people poke fun at him or try to pretend he isn't there, and sometimes it doesn't work out so good. That's when the joy's in danger and seems to go missing for a while. You might be walking out of the same town you just walked into half an hour before, with miles to go before the next one. The joy sinks down a little so you think it's disappeared over the horizon, even though it was there just a minute ago.

Then you're like somebody living on the street with no home, no food, no money. Or like an old woman in a retirement home who no one ever comes to visit. You feel guilty for feeling the joy in the first place, like it brought you a streak of bad luck. You tell yourself you're not going to let it get the upper hand anymore, no more singing silly songs in your veins.

You think of all the towns you've been to with Mr. Gene, so many you can't keep count, how the roads leading in look all the same, with maybe a few steep hills or a cherry grove thrown in, all with the same shattered glass on the side of the road and the same small pebbles that sparkle like diamonds. And the cars passing by you are drawn-out waves that sometimes honk because you make such an odd pair walking along, a

girl hauling a wagon full of bibles with a leather strap across her head for pulling power and Mr. Gene strolling ahead of you, practicing out his preaching, making gestures with his arms or walking with them pinned behind his back, like he's captain of a ship somewhere out at sea.

Then before you know it you feel the joy creeping up again with all these ferns shining off in the woods, like every part of them is clapping without a sound. So you end up saying to it, Okay, joy, go and do your thing, I can't keep you out anymore: Hartwick Pines 4 Miles, Broken Bow 10 miles, Walnut Grove 3 miles. Because there's really only one small town and you're always walking into it for the first time, the town that will make you or break you or welcome you with 4th of July flags waving on every front porch. That's just how the joy works, playing hide-n-seek because it's so damned shy, but it knows how to do a number on you and all your best intentions, which end up like so much dust blowing in the wind.

So when you see Mr. Gene rolling his head back and forth on the blind lady's bed after some rough customers carried him in and he tries to get the words out in a pouring flood, you try to remember all the joyful times you had with him walking into towns. You don't care what he's trying to say because he's still alive. You sit at the foot of the bed and wait for him to make sense because you know how long he's been waiting and rehearsing for this very moment.

Then guess what?

The joy you thought was so dangerous is the same thing he's trying to tell them about, the one that keeps showing up

all over the place no matter what's going on, in leaves and weather and somebody picking their nose when they think nobody's looking. Then you know nothing can touch the joy and nothing can hurt it, not even dying, which is what you gotta keep telling yourself the night Mr. Gene lays there on his deathbed, opening his mouth so feverish and wide it's like all he wants to do is sing.